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Title: *Neds*

Countries of Origin: UK, France, Italy

Year: 2011

Language: English

Production Companies: Blue Light, Fidélité Films, StudioUrania

Filming Location: Glasgow

Director: Peter Mullan

Producers: Olivier Delbosc, Alain de la Mata, Marc Missonnier

Screenwriter: Peter Mullan

Cinematographer: Roman Osin

Art Director: Caroline Grebbell

Editor: Colin Monie

Runtime: 124 minutes

Cast (Starring): Conor McCarron, Greg Forrest, Joe Szula

Synopsis: *Neds* tells a tale of good boy gone bad. John McGill is an intellectually gifted, working-class, Roman Catholic schoolboy in early-1970s Glasgow. But he finds that the road to academic success and social mobility is anything but easy, not least due to a lack of positive male role models in his life. John's father is an emotionally abusive alcoholic and his older brother, Benny, is an especially feared member of one of Glasgow's many feral, and therefore feared, teenage gangs. To add insult to injury, John's class background sees him rejected by the family of a middle-class boy with whom he strikes up a much-needed masculine bond. Fatally wounded by this rejection, John falls in with a local gang and swiftly becomes one of the notorious Neds (non-educated delinquents) of the film's title. His status within local gang culture is cemented by the discovery of a previously untapped taste for physical violence. Ultimately, however, John's inability to contain or control his psychotic tendencies sees him isolated from all those around them. He nearly kills a fellow teenager, Canta, and then single-handedly takes on a rival gang in what looks very much like an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The film ends on a note of ambiguous biblical symbolism: when a school van transporting John, Canta, and other delinquent school pupils through a local safari park breaks down, the two boys abscond, wandering away from camera through a field of grazing lions.

Critique: *Neds* highlights writer/director Peter Mullan's prominent, but also complex, place within contemporary Scottish and British cinemas. On one hand, this artist's prolific acting and directorial careers in the decade-and-a-half since his starring role in Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998) might

seem to align him closely with local traditions of social realist filmmaking. Many of the feature projects to which Mullan contributed during this period are marked by **several** of the characteristics that critics typically discern within the work of indigenous social realist filmmakers: contemporary (often working-class urban) setting and stories; socio-political topicality (and often, controversy); a left-wing ideological analysis of the allegedly iniquitous structure and functioning of contemporary Scottish and British societies. But at the same time, however, Mullan has consistently articulated strong reservations about what he sees as the aesthetic and ideological lack of imagination that much British social realist cinema displays. In one promotional interview supporting *Neds*, for instance, he complained that: "I get bored with naturalism and social realism... I get restless with it. If one has an imagination, one should use it – in my book." True to this logic, *Neds* is nothing if not an exuberantly imaginative take on the early-1970s working-class Glaswegian milieu within which the director grew up. To take but one illustrative example, the series of vicious knife fights in which central character John becomes embroiled reaches a surreal climax when Jesus Christ descends from the Cross erected outside the boy's local Roman Catholic church in order to claim a piece of the violent action. In sequences such as this, Mullan clearly flags his interest in exploring psychologically aberrant ideas and experiences alongside socially and historically accurate counterparts.

Yet *Neds* frequently feels closer in tone and approach to the classic Scottish/British social realist filmmaking practices than Mullan is perhaps willing to acknowledge. For one thing, the film is as unrelentingly deterministic as any of Ken Loach's Scottish projects in its insistence that ordinary working-class individuals are rarely able to escape or transcend the deprived (and thus, dehumanising) social circumstances into which they are born. After clearly establishing John's unusually pronounced academic ambition and ability, the plotline of *Neds* then employs a series of increasingly melodramatic coincidences and reversals in order to ensure that **the film's** central character never has the chance to fulfil his dreams of social mobility and personal fulfilment. In this regard, many viewers might find themselves sympathising with the confusion of John's Latin teacher at school, who at one stage protests that, "I find it hard to believe that in the space of six weeks you have suddenly degenerated into idiocy." Yet because the dramatic and thematic logic of *Neds* seems classically social realist in its overarching insistence upon the impermeable nature of the class boundaries that John attempts to navigate, this unlikely personal regression is just what has to occur.

More positively, it might also be said that many of the most imaginative narrative moments and details within *Neds* do indeed demonstrate the validity of a key point that Mullan wishes to make through his work as a writer and director, namely, that Scottish and British traditions of cinematic realism do not represent the only way in which local filmmakers can express and explore the complex realities of their native sociocultural histories and milieus. At one point in the narrative, for instance, John whiles away the morning hours of the school summer holidays by watching a television broadcast of a 1960s French TV adaption of *Robinson Crusoe*. On one hand, the snippet of quoted footage that viewers see here represents a painstakingly accurate (to the point of seeming arcane) social realist detail. But on the other, Mullan introduces the **material** in question not as a quasi-documentary end in itself, but **rather**, as raw material that can then be developed into a telling

(because expressively and imaginatively executed) thematic motif. Ultimately, *Neds* suggests that John is a Crusoe figure in reverse: the overbearing presence, not absence, of other people (bickering family, sadistic teachers, out-of-control gang members) is what represents the cause of his ever-escalating unhappiness and alienation.

Neds can be located within a wider Scottish cinematic context in several different ways. On one hand, the film *could* be seen as a representative example of Peter Mullan's small, but internationally lauded, oeuvre as writer/director to date. A range of key thematic preoccupations and storytelling approaches visible within Mullan's first two features, *Orphans* (1999) and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2001), resurface in his third: profoundly damaged and/or self-destructive models of masculinity, the repressive nature of institutionalised Catholicism, and a systematically engineered collision between elements of the absurd and the everyday, the scabrous and the serious, all spring to mind here. More generally, it might also be productive to contextualise *Neds* with regard to what many critics have identified as two of the most prominent (and frequently overlapping) strains of filmmaking within Scottish cinema from the 1970s onwards. These are a series of movies that explore experiences of childhood and/or adolescence and a local tradition of auteurist works marked by a profoundly autobiographical bent. To take two illustrative examples, Gillies MacKinnon's *Small Faces* (1996) and Richard Jobson's *16 Years of Alcohol* (2004) are films that share much in common with *Neds*. All three movies are set within broadly the same time period and local cultural milieu (late-1960s/early-1970s working-class urban Scotland); all three draw heavily upon their respective makers' personal memories of living in that place and time; all three acknowledge, but also critique, the seductive and destructive aspects of local gang cultures of the era; all three present education as a possible means of escape, both socially and spiritually speaking, from the dehumanising effects of endemic social deprivation and inequality. Viewed in this light, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the character John's near-total isolation and alienation by the conclusion of *Neds* is the fact that many native filmmakers have *to date* presented that *condition as a relatively common one within* modern Scottish society.

Reference: Demetrios Matheou, 'Peter Mullan: Glasgow belongs to me', *Sight and Sound* (February 2011), available @ <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49688>

Jonathan Murray